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### Indigenous Politics stream

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#### **Government policies and wider community attitudes towards Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage in the reconciliation decade**

##### **Abstract**

*In 1991, the Australian Commonwealth Parliament unanimously passed the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991. This Act implemented a ten-year process that aimed to reconcile Indigenous and non-Indigenous people by the end of 2000. One of the main goals of the reconciliation process was to develop a continuing national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage in the areas of health, education, housing, employment and law. However, this goal was not achieved by the conclusion of the reconciliation process at the end of 2000.*

*In this paper, I examine the failure of this socio-economic goal. First, I briefly discuss the appalling levels of Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage. Second, I argue that two interrelated factors significantly contributed to the failure to develop a national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage during the reconciliation process. These factors were the Government approaches to addressing Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage and non-Indigenous people's attitudes and understandings concerning Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage.*

##### **Introduction**

The Australian formal reconciliation process ran from 1991 to 2000. One of its main goals was to foster a national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage in the areas of health, overrepresentation in custody, education, housing and employment. In this paper, I argue that this national commitment was not developed throughout the ten-year reconciliation process. First, I briefly outline some examples of the appalling Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage that occurred during the reconciliation process. Second, I examine the two primary causes of the failure to develop a national commitment: government policies, particularly at a Commonwealth level, and the attitudes of the wider, non-Indigenous community. These two causes are clearly related; government policies are influenced by the apathy and hostility of the wider community towards Indigenous people and wider community attitudes can be conditioned by Government policies and leadership.

##### **Socio-economic indicators**

Despite some improvements in a few isolated areas, overall there was no improvement in any of the above-mentioned socio-economic areas for Indigenous people over the ten-year reconciliation process. A range of indicators in each of these areas illustrated that firstly, there is an enormous

level of disadvantage between Indigenous people and the wider community and, secondly, overall Indigenous disadvantage in these areas either stagnated or even worsened over the reconciliation process. For space reasons, I only illustrate two indicators in each of the above-mentioned socio-economic areas, including those often mentioned such as life expectancy and deaths in custody. However, numerous other indicators not considered in this paper also illustrate the significant and often worsening levels of socio-economic disadvantage experienced by Indigenous people during the reconciliation process (see for example Altman and Hunter 2003; Gunstone 2007; Hunter and Schwab 2003).

Life expectancy, defined as “the average number of years a person born in a particular year can expect to live if the age specific rates of mortality at that time continue to apply”, for Indigenous people at the end of the twentieth century was approximately 20 years less than for the wider community (AMA 2002, 2). Infant mortality rate, defined as “the number of deaths of children under one year of age per 1,000 live births”, has remained about two and a half times that of the total Australian population since the early 1980s (AMA 2002, 2).

The proportion of Indigenous deaths in custody was approximately 18 percent of all deaths in custody during the 1990s compared to 12.1 percent for the previous decade (Collins and Mouzos 2001, 2; Neill 2002, 212). The proportion of Indigenous prisoners was approximately 20 percent of all prisoners in 2001 compared to 14 percent in 1991 (ABS 2001a, 9).

The educational attainment, defined as “the proportion of the people aged 15 years and over who do not have a post-secondary educational qualification”, for Indigenous people only improved from 90.7 percent in 1991 to 85.2 percent in 2001 compared to the wider community which improved from 73.6 percent to 65.3 percent in 2001 (Gray and Auld 2000, vi, 26; ABS 2002a, Tables I01, I14; ABS 2001b, 4). The level of school attendance, which impacts significantly on educational outcomes such as reading benchmarks and Year 12 retention rates, are extraordinarily poor for Indigenous students, who on average, miss more than a year of both primary and secondary schooling over the life of their schooling (Neill 2002, 245; CA 2000, 3).

The rate of Indigenous home ownership only improved from 31 percent in 1996 to 32 percent in 2001, compared to 71 percent for non-Indigenous people in both 1996 and 2001 (ABS 2002b, 233; ABS 2003, 249). Significant numbers of Indigenous communities lack basic components of infrastructure, such as adequate water, electricity and sewerage services and in 1998, a minimum of 20,000 Indigenous people lived in communities that had permanently inadequate water sources (Ring and Brown 2002, 629; Jackson and Ward 1999, 437).

The proportion of working-age Indigenous people, neither employed nor on employment programs, only marginally improved from 71.4 percent in 1991 to 66.8 percent in 2001 (Gray and Auld 2000, 24; ABS 2002a, Table I16). The median income level for Indigenous adults worsened from only 70 percent of

the median income level for non-Indigenous adults in 1991 to just 59 percent in 2001 (Altman and Hunter 2003, 4-8).

### **Government policies**

Throughout the ten-year reconciliation process, no Commonwealth Government developed a national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage. A major cause of this failure was the politicisation of Indigenous Affairs policies by both Labor and the Liberal/National Coalition. Both these parties generally focussed on narrow aspects of Indigenous Affairs policies and marginalised, or ignored, broader areas and ideas. Prominent Indigenous leader Noel Pearson (2002a, 11) argued that on the one hand, Labor has often developed, (although generally not implemented), policies on Indigenous rights, yet has been “weak and wrong in relation to the breakdown of responsibility in Aboriginal society occasioned by passive welfare dependency and substance abuse”, and on the other hand, the Coalition “will better understand the problems of responsibility, but will advocate further diminution of the native title property rights of Aboriginal Australians”. The Labor and Coalition parties focussed respectively on rights and practical issues (often termed ‘practical reconciliation’) and failed to understand or acknowledge that Indigenous Affairs policies need to both recognise Indigenous rights and address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage.

The Keating Labor Government was in office for the first five years of the reconciliation process, 1991 to 1996. During that time, the Keating Government claimed that the focus of its Indigenous Affairs policies was on both recognising Indigenous rights, such as native title and a limited form of Indigenous self-determination, (although not national land rights or a treaty), and symbolic issues, such as officially recognising the Aboriginal flag. Following their defeat at the 1996 Commonwealth election, the Labor Party continued to emphasise Indigenous rights and symbolic issues. Labor’s Indigenous Affairs policies for the 1998 election focussed predominantly on Indigenous rights, such as supporting Indigenous arts, the stolen generations, native title, heritage protection and constitutional recognition (ALP 1998, 8-14). It is interesting to note though that Labor’s actual record in Indigenous Affairs while in government often contradicted its claimed emphasis on Indigenous rights. In the 1990s, the Labor Government restricted Indigenous self-determination, through the imposition of the unpopular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and attempted to shift the responsibility of addressing land rights onto the legal system following the High Court’s 1992 *Mabo* decision (Milloo 1998, 27, 29).

Further, during the 1990s, the Labor Party, when in government and in opposition, generally failed to adequately address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage. Labor policies largely ignored or marginalised issues such as welfare dependency and substance abuse (Pearson 2002a, 11). For example, in outlining its platform for the 1998 Commonwealth election, Labor outlined just three policy initiatives that concerned Indigenous socio-economic conditions – employment programs, health and deaths in custody; it did not address issues of domestic violence, substance abuse or out-of-custody suicide (ALP 1998, 8-14). Other examples of this reluctance to examine issues of socio-economic disadvantage and their possible causes included

the lack of engagement and analysis by the Labor Party concerning Noel Pearson's ideas on welfare dependency and its connection to socio-economic disadvantage, the failure of the Labor Government in 1995 to incorporate commitments to improve socio-economic disadvantage into Commonwealth legislation to establish the Indigenous Land Corporation, and the failure of the Labor Cabinet in 1995 to endorse the recommendation of Robert Tickner, then Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage through a Centenary of Federation Infrastructure Project (see Pearson 2002b; Neill 2002, 53, 16-17; Tickner 2001, 45).

This emphasis on Indigenous rights and symbolic issues over socio-economic disadvantage reflected the views of many of Labor's constituency. Pearson (2002c) argued:

Federal Labor is dominated by what I call the progressivist intellectual middle stratum. They have played a role in achieving recognition of Aboriginal people's property rights, but I contend that the prejudice, social theories and thinking habits of left-leaning, liberally-minded people make them unable to do anything further for Aboriginal people by attacking our real disadvantage factors.

Following their victory at the 1996 Commonwealth election, the new Howard Coalition Government rejected the approach of the previous Keating Government to Indigenous Affairs. Indigenous leader Geoff Clark (1998, 5) criticised this change and argued, "from the outset, the Coalition Government has systematically attacked Indigenous rights". As discussed above, the Howard Government focussed on practical issues – addressing socio-economic disadvantage – rather than on symbolism and Indigenous rights.

In emphasising practical issues, the Howard Government was also reflecting the views of its constituency. Several conservative commentators supported the Howard Government's approach (see Albrechtsen 2002, 39; McGuinness 2000, 239).

The refusal to consider symbolic issues showed the Howard Government to be one that failed to embrace the importance of symbolism in bringing some form of justice to Indigenous peoples. Also, by refusing to recognise Indigenous rights, such as self-determination or a treaty, the Howard Government failed to understand the fundamental link between Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage and Indigenous rights.

Further, despite the Howard Government's public commitment to practical issues, it largely failed to develop effective programs and policies to address this commitment (Tickner 2001, 47; Pearson 2002b). An example of this failure was the refusal of the Howard Government to overturn the Northern Territory's mandatory sentencing legislation, instead merely removing juvenile offenders from the legislation's jurisdiction (Loff 2000, 2071). This was despite recommendations from the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) to divert Indigenous offenders away from the prison system and the evidence of the increasing incarceration rate of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory (Loff 2000, 2071; NAALAS 2000, 11). Another example was the changes made to Abstudy, a scheme

designed to support Indigenous tertiary education. The mainstreaming of Abstudy saw a significant reduction of over 10 percent in the number of Indigenous people accessing both University and TAFE sectors from 1998/99 to 1999/2000 (Brabham et al. 2002, 12).

Another example was the lack of resources spent on Indigenous health. Indigenous health is about three times worse than overall Australian health, yet on a per capita basis, the Howard Government spent in 2002, in the health programs that it directly controls, only 74 cents on Indigenous people for every \$1 spent for the wider population (Ring and Elston 1999, 228; Ring and Brown 2002, 629). In terms of funding from all sources, in 1998-99, for every one dollar spent on overall Australian health, only \$1.22 was spent on Indigenous health (AIHW 2001, 2). Further, in the two main Commonwealth-funded health programs - Medicare and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme - the level of expenditure for each Indigenous person was only 37 percent of the level of expenditure for each non-Indigenous person and overall the two programs only contributed 7.3 percent of the total amount spent on Indigenous health, compared to 23.9 percent of the total amount spent on non-Indigenous health (AIHW 2001, xiv). Finally, from 1995-96 to 1998-99, the proportion of funding spent on Indigenous health from the overall health funding area, (including Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments, private health insurance and out-of-pocket expenses), only increased from 2.2 percent to 2.6 percent (AIHW 2001, 16; AIHW 2002, 211). Ring and Elston (1999, 231) argued, "the current situation [in funding for Indigenous health], where the Commonwealth is spending perhaps a fifth of what it should be spending on a needs basis, is a major impediment to effective reconciliation".

These examples suggest that the Howard Government's new approach to Indigenous Affairs was based less on attempting to improve policy and more on simply rejecting the previous Keating Government's policies. This approach by the Howard Government was also driven by opinion polls and populist policies.

Altman and Hunter (2003) also questioned the effectiveness of Howard's emphasis on practical issues. In examining socio-economic outcomes for Indigenous people throughout the 1991-2000 reconciliation process, they compared the socio-economic outcomes for Indigenous people in the Keating era and the Howard era. They concluded that, "while practical reconciliation forms the rhetorical basis for Indigenous policy development since 1996, there is no evidence that the Howard governments have delivered better outcomes for Indigenous Australians than their predecessors" (Altman and Hunter 2003, v; see also Hunter and Schwab 2003, 94-96; Ross 2001, 155).

There are several other ways in which both Labor and Coalition Governments, at Commonwealth and State levels, have failed to develop a national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage. One of these was the approach by Governments to Indigenous self-determination. During the reconciliation process, Governments often used the policy of self-determination as a justification for ignoring Indigenous community problems. This avoidance of government responsibility ensured that Indigenous community problems, such as domestic violence, substance abuse and suicide, remained largely unacknowledged by Governments and

consequently, the problems have continued to have a devastating impact upon Indigenous communities (Tucak 2002, 16). All levels of Government have largely abdicated their responsibility on these issues and placed them onto Indigenous communities. Not only Labor Governments, but even Coalition Governments, with their hostile views on self-determination, have used the mantra of self-determination to avoid accepting responsibility for Indigenous community violence and for failing to develop policies concerning Indigenous social problems (Neill 2002, 22-23, 85-86; Saunders 2002, 17).

This abdication of responsibility failed to recognise that it was often government policies that led to many of these community problems. For example, a report written for the Cape York Health Council in 2000 “details the level of pressure the Queensland Government placed on communities to open beer canteens in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, often against their wishes”, for the purposes of providing an alternative source of income from Government funding (Gordon 2001, 3).

In addition to accepting their responsibilities, Governments also should acknowledge the importance of Indigenous self-determination by ensuring that they adequately support and fund Indigenous organisations and communities in their efforts to reduce Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage. Genuine Indigenous self-determination, not merely Government rhetoric, remains an important component of improving Indigenous health, overrepresentation in custody, education, housing and employment. However, during 1972 to 1996, when Indigenous self-determination was generally Commonwealth Government policy, all Governments largely determined for themselves to what extent their self-determination policies would operate. It can be argued that genuine self-determination has never been fully implemented; the policies often masked bureaucratic paternalism (Godwell 2003, 11). But any meaningful address to Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage must involve Indigenous self-determination. In discussing the importance of genuine self-determination for his own communities, Pearson (2000a, 80) argued the need for:

Self-determination and our right to autonomy - Cape York Peninsula people must control our own representative organisations and must be free from arbitrary interference from the state and external quarters. Our regional, community and local structures – whilst having relations with government and outside agencies – must be independent and accountable to our own community.

Self-determination also means that Indigenous people should be able to decide for themselves their own lifestyles and priorities and these might not necessarily be the same as those preferred by the wider community. If this “choice in Aboriginal affairs policy is taken seriously and logically, it renders somewhat inappropriate and undesirable the simple and categorical pursuit of statistical equality between Aborigines and other Australians as a policy or program goal” (Sanders 1991, 17). Most Governments failed to recognise that, while there is an urgent need to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage, Governments should not focus too heavily on statistical

equality, a concept that can be argued to be “vaguely ‘assimilationist’” (Sanders 1991, 17).

Another factor behind the failure of Governments to foster a national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage was the lack of cooperation and coordination between all levels of government in developing and implementing programs to address this disadvantage (Anderson 1997; Ryan 1999, 28). Some attempts were made to improve this situation. Aboriginal Health Framework Agreements were developed that attempted to recognise the roles and responsibilities of Commonwealth and State Governments as well as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and local Indigenous organisations (Anderson 1999, 232). In 1995, the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Services was established in the Commonwealth Department of Health in a successful attempt to improve the coordination of programs (Eades 2000, 469). Also, some recognition within Governments occurred of the need for coordinated national efforts to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage (CA 2000, 8). However, despite isolated efforts like these, during the ten-year reconciliation process, many Indigenous communities were crushed under the bureaucratic weight of numerous socio-economic programs being administered by varying levels of Government (Pearson 2000b, 170-171; Gordon 2001, 126).

There was also much wasting of resources through the lack of cooperation and rivalry between Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments. An example of this waste was in the education sector of the Northern Territory. Collins (1999, 57) argued that the Northern Territory Government levied Commonwealth funds for Indigenous education at a rate of 46.1 percent for ‘on-costs’, compared to on-costs in other states of between 4 and 18.6 percent. The Territory Government also failed to access Commonwealth funding for Indigenous education due to “tensions” between the two Governments, thus resulting, in one instance, of the Territory Government accessing only \$196,000 out of a possible \$38 million available from the Commonwealth (Collins 1999, 55). National, coordinated approaches to addressing Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage need to be undertaken by all levels of Government, local Indigenous communities and by a genuinely representative national Indigenous organisation.

Further, all levels of Government have often marginalised or even ignored reports that identified disparities between Indigenous people and the wider Australian population in a range of socio-economic areas. Rather than implementing the recommendations, governments and bureaucrats often did not pay sufficient attention and committed few resources to these reports (Ring and Brown 2002, 629-630; Ring and Brown 2003, 4-5). For example, the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments did not implement a large number of recommendations from the RCIADIC. Also, Maree O’Halloran, the President of the NSW Teachers Federation, argued that the NSW Government abandoned a review of its Indigenous education policy because it feared having the “damaging results” of its policies publicised prior to the State election (Doherty 2003, 4). A report into Indigenous education in the Northern Territory, *Learning Lessons*, found that successive Northern Territory governments and bureaucrats often failed to make any attempt to

address concerns over Indigenous education, instead trying to hide the failings of the education system:

For decades there has been no interest at departmental or governmental level in a dispassionate analysis of the educational outcomes of Indigenous students. Indeed, the review received credible evidence from current and former departmental officers that there had been a deliberate approach of burying or 'toning down' information about the poor results being achieved by Indigenous students (Collins 1999, 47).

Following the release of this report, the Northern Territory Government initially continued to obfuscate over their responsibility to address weaknesses in the education system. Gordon (2001, 88) stated that although Shane Stone, the then Northern Territory Chief Minister, argued that the Territory spent a disproportionate amount on Indigenous education as "40 per cent of our education budget is spent on 25 per cent of the population", Stone neglected to add that almost 40 percent of the students in the education system were Indigenous students. Thus the Territory spent approximately the same amount proportionally on Indigenous education as they did on non-Indigenous education, notwithstanding the gross disparities in educational outcomes between the two groups.

The failure of Governments to address the recommendations contained in reports can also be illustrated by analysing several major Commonwealth policies, reports and strategies on Indigenous education developed throughout the reconciliation process. These included the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (1993), the *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (1994), *A National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: 1996-2002* (1995) and *The National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2000-2004* (2000). As these reports all contained very similar recommendations (DEET 1993; Yunupingu 1994; MCEETYA 1995; CA 2000) and were published over a seven year period, it appears that Governments largely did not address these recommendations. Examples such as this illustrate that the failure of Governments to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage was often due to not implementing previously developed policies.

There were several other reasons why Governments failed to foster a national commitment to address Indigenous disadvantage during the formal reconciliation process. One reason was the imposition of conditions by Governments on Indigenous communities in order for that community to receive vital services. An example of this occurred when the Northern Territory Government required the Jowoy people to abandon their claim for native title in order to receive renal dialysis facilities (Ryan 1999, 28). Another reason was the failure of Commonwealth Governments to ensure that accurate statistics were accumulated that could have pointed to long-term and short-term trends in socio-economic disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. During the 1990s, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) did not measure levels of improvement, or otherwise, across many areas of Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage, and in some areas, such



as out-of-custody suicides, there was a dearth of reliable statistics (ABS 2002c, 87; see also Altman and Hunter 2003, 2-3 regarding difficulties in utilising ABS Census data).

### **Non-Indigenous attitudes**

The second area that indicated the lack of a national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage was a range of attitudes held by many in the wider, non-Indigenous community. These attitudes varied from apathy to a refusal to look at contemporary situations to a focus on only positive outcomes.

Some non-Indigenous people hold negative or apathetic attitudes towards Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage, or even refuse to acknowledge that any Indigenous disadvantage exists. In 2000, a Newspoll survey on non-Indigenous attitudes to reconciliation and Indigenous issues found only 41 percent of respondents thought Indigenous people were a disadvantaged group and 60 percent felt Indigenous people received too much Government assistance (Newspoll 2000, 34). There are also considerable levels of apathy concerning Indigenous disadvantage existing amongst non-Indigenous people. As the significant socio-economic disadvantage is being experienced by Indigenous people rather than non-Indigenous people, there is often an acceptance of the crisis and a lack of concern to improve the situation (Pearson 2000b, 166; Clark 2001, 12). Some media also demonstrate similar views on Indigenous disadvantage through their reinforcement of negative stereotypes, their sensationalist reporting and their apathy on reporting on Indigenous social issues (Neill 2002, 87-88; Gordon 2001, 19-21).

An example of this lack of concern among many in the wider community for Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage was the support amongst many non-Indigenous people for mandatory sentencing regimes. These people largely ignored the fact that mandatory sentencing directly contradicted the RCIADIC's key recommendation that Indigenous people be jailed only as a last resort. In the 1990s, the support for tough law and order policies was very strong in the wider community. The Northern Territory Conservative Government increased their majority at the 1997 Northern Territory election following its introduction of mandatory sentencing legislation. Consequently, the Labor Opposition did not actively campaign against mandatory sentencing, likely because of the law's electoral appeal. It took the suicide of an Indigenous boy, sentenced under the Northern Territory mandatory sentencing regime, for the media and the wider community to start denouncing the laws. However, despite a short barrage of criticism from the media and some in the wider community, there were minimal changes made to the Northern Territory regime (although the laws were abolished with the election of the Labor Government in the Northern Territory in 2001). The Western Australia Government still continues to operate their mandatory sentencing regime. The Australian wider community continued to generally demand tough law and order policies and State and Territory Governments continued to implement these policies (Tickner 2001, 79).

Those in the wider community who are apathetic or hostile to Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage have often failed to understand the

importance of recognising the past. They generally do not consider issues such as the invasion, massacres, genocide or stolen generations as relevant to alleviating Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage, instead arguing that “colourblind” policies should apply to anyone who is in a poor socio-economic situation (see Albrechtsen 2002, 40). Critics of the stolen generations inquiry illustrated this attitude of not recognising the past with their ‘white blindfold’ views of Australian history. This failure to acknowledge the past by some non-Indigenous people significantly contributes to the failure to improve Indigenous socio-economic conditions. Jackson and Ward (1999, 438) argued that:

Reconciliation always begins with acknowledgement or, more colloquially, ‘truth telling’ ... In Australia, there is a need to acknowledge that the benefits now enjoyed by some have been at the expense of incalculable suffering to others .... If contemporary Aboriginal health is accepted to be a manifestation of a population dying in despair, anger and disillusionment, then reconciliation is fundamental ... reconciliation becomes the foundation for health services development.

Many non-Indigenous people in the wider community do not share these views discussed above. They see themselves as having progressive and supportive attitudes towards Indigenous issues. Nevertheless, many of these non-Indigenous people also hold opinions that have contributed to the failure to develop a national commitment to address Indigenous disadvantage in the 1990s. These opinions include a failure to appreciate the importance of history, a reluctance to criticise progressive policies on Indigenous issues, regardless of the effect of the policies, seeing Indigenous people and issues in an essentialist manner, and avoiding discussing Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage such as domestic violence and substance abuse. These views have contributed to many ‘progressive’ non-Indigenous people failing both to honestly appraise Indigenous socio-economic conditions and to conduct an open dialogue of the most appropriate measures to address the conditions. These views have also largely prevented many progressive non-Indigenous people from lobbying governments to implement urgently needed policy reforms. Pearson (2002d) argued that these views have contributed to the worsening of Indigenous socio-economic conditions and that some of the most “decisive but unrecognised problems in the reconciliation process” are the “knee-jerk responses” from “pro-reconciliation, liberally minded Australians” to Indigenous socio-economic conditions; these responses “are not only futile but positively destructive” as they fail to address Indigenous needs.

One attitude held by many progressive non-Indigenous people that has contributed to the failure to develop a national commitment to address Indigenous disadvantage concerns their understandings of history. These non-Indigenous people, while not rejecting the importance of history like others in the wider community, have still often failed to develop much awareness of the complexities of the past and the connections between the past and the present. For instance, past government policies such as

assimilation are often condemned without also looking at how the wider Australian society was extremely supportive of these policies. This attitude then can lead to the conclusion that it was only the government and some sections of society but not all of society that was to blame. As Neill (2002, 187) argued:

By selectively targeting church and former welfare authorities, protectors and politicians who are now (conveniently) dead, contemporary critics of assimilation let the broader society off the hook. Far from being the handiwork of a few zealots and 'holy terrors', the policy and practice of assimilation was embraced by institutions and individuals across Australia (see also Schaap 2000, 4; Cowlshaw 2000, 22).

This view then enables many progressive non-Indigenous people to inappropriately distance themselves from the past. An understanding of how the wider Australian society for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century supported policies of assimilation could assist contemporary society in understanding how to more adequately resolve Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations.

Many non-Indigenous people also failed to distinguish between the various circumstances and motives of those directly involved in past government policies. As Cowlshaw (2000, 21) argued, "to understand the past means understanding its moral complexities and ambiguities". To brand all those involved in the policy of assimilation, for example, as having genocidal intent, masks the significant differences of circumstances and motives involved with different cases, and thus fails to identify those who were guilty of genocide (see Gaita 1999, 125; Manne 2001, 30). Further, "there appears to be little to suggest that supporters of reconciliation have any knowledge of the many people who since the early nineteenth century sought to ameliorate Aboriginal conditions and reform attitudes, policies and outcomes" (Reynolds 1998, 250-251).

Another issue concerning the assimilation policies also illustrates the failure of many non-Indigenous people to understand the complexities of the past. This involves the debate about whether some Indigenous children were removed with parental consent or were stolen. Neill (2002, 138-139) criticised those supporters of the stolen generations who have argued that there was no need to investigate how Indigenous children were removed from their families: "By insisting that the circumstances surrounding a child's removal were irrelevant, advocates of the stolen generations were exhibiting their own brand of denialism; their own form of not wanting to know".

Further, the eagerness of some non-Indigenous peoples "to condemn and vilify settlers and governments as deliberately genocidal racists" implies "that we today are innocent, exonerated from responsibility by our understanding of the murderous or wrong headed past" (Cowlshaw 2000, 21). Thus, these progressive non-Indigenous people have often focussed on condemning the past to the exclusion of looking at concerns and responsibilities in the present. For example, while many non-Indigenous people, and some sections of the print media, have supported an official apology to the stolen generations, fewer have advocated that contemporary Australia should be responsible for enacting other types of restitution, such as

compensation (Neill 2002, 122; see also ANTaR 2001, 26). Also, many progressive non-Indigenous people have blamed the significant levels of Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage predominately on the history of race relations in Australia, rather than also exploring other, more contemporary causes of this disadvantage. Cowlishaw (2000, 21-22) cautioned against these attitudes of some progressive non-Indigenous people:

The complacent moral fervour, even zealotry, of some who support the Aboriginal cause may be as much a barrier to an understanding of Aborigines and their interests as are the infamous mythic rednecks we all love to hate. We whitefellas seem as unable as ever to examine either our own moral assumptions or the real experiences of Aboriginal people today.

Many non-Indigenous people, in failing to understand and learn from history, are repeating the mistakes made by previous generations of progressive non-Indigenous people, such as working with Indigenous people in ways that are culturally inappropriate, simplistic, patronising and disempowering. Pearson (2000b, 50) argued:

Not all white people involved in Aboriginal affairs have been malign, many have come with good intentions. This is now a widespread model of governance – the ‘white dictator’ model has given way to the ‘white saviour/servant’ model. The good hearted missionaries of earlier days are the predecessors of the current mob ... the problem is that their concept of themselves as saviours of Aboriginal people is destructive. It has ‘passive welfare’ written all over it.

In order to develop a national commitment to address Indigenous disadvantage, it is essential that non-Indigenous people, particularly those working with Indigenous people, understand the importance of jointly developing and implementing culturally appropriate, holistic, realistic and empowering strategies. Further, non-Indigenous people need to recognise the diversity amongst Indigenous peoples and cultures throughout Australia and should not assume that strategies found successful in one area would therefore succeed for all Indigenous communities. Also, progressive non-Indigenous people, in a similar vein to Governments, need to both support the concept of Indigenous self-determination and accept that the enacting of this policy does not absolve them of responsibility over Indigenous issues.

Another attitude held by many progressive non-Indigenous people that contributes to the lack of a national commitment is a reluctance to criticise those progressive policies that have replaced the discredited policies of the past. An example of this reluctance involves the policy of bilingual education in the Northern Territory. Introduced in 1973 by the Whitlam Labor Government, the aim of bilingual education was to encourage the literacy of Indigenous students in both English and their Indigenous language. Despite the policy being hailed as enabling Indigenous communities to be involved in their children’s education and recognising the value of Indigenous cultures and languages, there have been a number of concerns with the policy. These

concerns include inappropriate teacher training, inadequate and insufficient resources, inexperienced teachers, a high turnover of teachers, a lack of linguists or English as a Second Language teachers, and occasional hostility (Collins 1999, 121-122). In 1998, the Northern Territory Country Liberal Government decided to focus on English literacy and phase out special funding for bilingual schools. This decision ignored the benefits of bilingual education and was made without consulting Indigenous people. However, in criticising this decision, opponents have often concentrated on the Government attack on Indigenous self-determination (which should be criticised) and have largely failed to examine why the policy of bilingual education has not improved the educational outcomes for Indigenous students and how concerns with the policy could be addressed (see HREOC 2000, 66; Morrissey 2003, 56).

Along similar lines, some non-Indigenous researchers are reluctant to conduct research that, despite offering the possibilities of providing useful feedback on socio-economic conditions, could be unfairly construed as being guided by past discredited Indigenous policies. For example, there is a lack of research on a number of educational disparities in the Northern Territory. Some bureaucrats, school principals and researchers are concerned that researching attendance levels is a throwback to the oppressive, paternalistic policies of the assimilation era, and accordingly do not often define the meaning of attendance and sometimes expand the concept of attendance to incorporate watching football matches (see Collins 1999, 157).

Another attitude held by many progressive non-Indigenous people that could restrict the fostering of a national commitment is one of seeing Indigenous people and issues in an essentialist manner. These non-Indigenous people often hold romantic views that posit Indigenous peoples and cultures as 'noble savages', which can often hinder attempts to improve Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage. For example, Neill (2002, 241) argued, "studying English has been cast as a threat to tribal culture. This has contributed to a crisis of illiteracy among indigenous students in the Northern Territory". Foley (1999, 31) argued that these non-Indigenous people:

still regard Indigenous people in an essentialist way. This results in an unwitting romanticising and idealising of the Aboriginal peoples and their 'heroic' struggle for justice ... A comprehensive ignorance about the people, culture, political history and landscape of Koori Australia is something that progressive political groups too often share with the rest of white-Australia (see also Pearson 2002d; Morrissey 2003, 56).

Finally, many progressive non-Indigenous people are also reluctant to discuss issues of Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage, particularly issues of community health, such as domestic violence, substance abuse and out-of-custody suicides (Pearson 2002c). The reasons for this reticence amongst these non-Indigenous people and elements of the media include a fear that discussing these issues could cause an increase in racism and a desire to only discuss issues that could be posited in the positive stories that were so favoured by the formal reconciliation process. An example of this was the reaction by the wider community in the late 1990s to the release of several

reports on domestic violence in Indigenous communities. Despite the shocking revelations contained in these reports and the escalating levels of domestic violence, they were virtually ignored by the wider society (see Brunton 2001, 21).

Even when these issues are raised, they are often attributed entirely to the historical legacies of invasion and colonisation. Noel Pearson argued that, while accepting that dispossession is the “ultimate explanation”, other factors besides historical legacies could also play a role in Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage (Pearson 2002a, 12; Pearson 2000a; Pearson 2000b). These factors, Pearson argued, include welfare dependency, a high availability of alcohol and other drugs, significant amounts of idle time, and lack of community condemnation of social problems (Pearson 2000a, 38-39; Pearson 2002c; see also Gordon 2001, 79). Pearson (2000a, 24) argued that issues such as substance abuse needed to be treated as a health condition, not as a symptom of dispossession, as this categorisation absolves Indigenous people and communities from attempting to combat substance abuse. Manne (2002, 13) asserted that these arguments from Pearson, as well as those from Indigenous academics and commentators such as Boni Robertson and Marcia Langton, challenge progressive supporters of reconciliation - “the sentimental, romantic, suburban, anti-Howard, moral middle class” - to address socio-economic issues such as domestic violence and alcohol addiction.

## **Conclusion**

One of the main goals of the ten-year Australian formal reconciliation process was to foster a national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage in the areas of health, overrepresentation in custody, education, housing and employment. This goal was not achieved by the conclusion of the reconciliation process at the end of 2000. In this paper, I argued that there were two interrelated factors that substantially contributed to the failure of this goal to develop a national commitment. These factors were the Indigenous Affairs policies of governments and the attitudes towards Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage held by many non-Indigenous people.

It is imperative that we, as an Australian community, learn from the mistakes of the reconciliation decade. Overall Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage has worsened since the conclusion of the reconciliation process. Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments are making similar mistakes to those their predecessors committed in the 1990s. Many in the wider community remain apathetic, hostile or uncertain concerning the level of Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage. Indigenous people, communities and organisations remain substantially disempowered in their capacity to improve their socio-economic outcomes. A national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage remains a long way off.

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